



LEADERSHIP

Grounded and grateful



ATM columnist Ben Gibson catches up with Dennis Grounds who after more than 30 years in the industry has just embarked on another exciting chapter in his career.

Up until February 2024, Dennis Grounds, pictured playing in last year's ASTMA Golf Championship at Royal Adelaide, was superintendent at Club Catalina on the NSW South Coast for the past 11 years

If you haven't made the trip to the South Coast of New South Wales, then do yourself a favour and block out a week or two in the schedule and make the effort. It is home to a magnificent collection of golf courses dotted along the famed coastline which are managed by a tight knit group of superintendents who produce some of the best playing surfaces in the country. A more passionate and respected bunch of individuals you will not meet and among their number is one Dennis Grounds.

Ask any of his counterparts in that neck of the woods and they will all tell you that 'Grounds', as he is affectionately known, is one of the most affable blokes in the industry and an all-round good nut. Boasting a rather appropriate surname given the industry he chose to pursue, Grounds has just embarked on his 32nd year in the industry. It was back in January 1992 that the then avid junior golfer was given an opportunity to cut his teeth as an apprentice at Young Golf Club in rural NSW and in the years since he has gone on to forge a rewarding career wherever he has gone.

This coming April would have seen him chalk up 11 years in charge at Club Catalina in beautiful Bateman's Bay, however, just as this profile was being submitted for publication, Grounds (48) confirmed he was on the move after accepting the assistant superintendent role at Royal Canberra Golf Club. Ahead of his move to the nation's capital, we caught up with Grounds to reflect on his career and management style, in particular, his successful tenure leading the team at Club Catalina...

Tell us a bit about your background and how you got started in the turf industry? I grew up in Young, NSW. I was okay at school, pretty quiet, although they must've seen something in me as I was elected school captain in Year 10 at Young Catholic Secondary School. I am the eldest of four children all born within four years of each other. Anthony and Traci are twins two years younger than me, while Renee is four years younger than me. We had an awesome childhood and have many fond memories of going out to dad's family farm and going on great family holidays.

As you did in the country, I played all sports growing up. I loved my rugby league and was part of two premiership-winning teams as a junior with dad as coach which meant the world to me. Golf was also a big focus and I was twice junior champion at Young Golf Club, while I also played A-grade tennis, basketball and cricket. Mum and dad would drive us all around the region to sport on a daily basis. My sisters were very good netballers and my brother played representative rugby league and was signed by the Parramatta Eels between 1995-1997 playing U20s and Reserve Grade.



I started my journey in turf management at Young Golf Club. I played golf there as a junior as well as caddied for members with my brother to earn a bit of pocket money. I had a love of golf courses from a young age. I recall if we were travelling on holidays that I would always ask the old man to drive past the nearest golf course so we could have a look. I remember he took us to the ESP Open at Royal Canberra in 1988; I reckon that was the exact moment I fell in love with turf and golf course architecture.

What was the biggest learning curve when you took on your first superintendent role?

It was when I was approached to take the role of superintendent at Harden Country Club after three years as the assistant at Young GC. The Harden job involved looking after 18 holes of golf solo with a band of volunteers and I learned quickly on the run – you simply had to. Members at those smaller clubs still have a standard you have to uphold and at the end of the day you are the custodian of their club and course. To this day the greens at Harden



Top and above: Club Catalina is a 27-hole complex located in Bateman's Bay on the NSW South Coast

have been my favourite to manage. They were a mixture of Pennncross and browntop bent and the surface you could produce rivalled anything around the country. I wish I could have picked them up and taken them with me!

How is the senior leadership team at Club Catalina structured in order to look after such a diverse property to the standards you do? I am really proud of where the course senior management team is heading. The team consists of myself, assistants Wayne Gregory and Craig Shephard, senior greenkeepers Matt Stevens and Jarrod Cottington who also fill the roles of spray technician and irrigation technician respectively. The way we communicate as a leadership group is crucial to the day-to-day operations out on the course. I have enjoyed taking a backward step and seeing just how well the boys have taken on the extra responsibility of the daily operations at the club. In turn, this had a very positive effect with good communication throughout the whole team.

How would you describe your leadership style? I would describe myself as a compassionate, understanding and caring leader that likes to lead by example. I really like to have a close relationship with all team members. I find it so much easier to have that genuine conversation or awkward/positive chat when it is warranted. I feel it is important to have genuine interest in what team members enjoy outside of work.

CAREER PROFILE DENNIS GROUNDS

Feb 2024 – present: Assistant superintendent, Royal Canberra GC, ACT

Apr 2013 – Feb 2024: Superintendent, Club Catalina, NSW

Sep 2006 – Apr 2013: Superintendent, Young GC, NSW

Apr 2003 – Aug 2006: Superintendent, Harden CC, NSW

Jan 2000 – Mar 2003: Assistant superintendent, Young GC, NSW

Dec 1997 – Dec 1999: Greenkeeper, Garangula Polo Club, NSW

Sep 1995 – Nov 1997: Greenkeeper, Yowani CC, ACT

Jan 1992 – Sep 1995: Apprentice, Young GC, NSW



PHOTOS: NEARMAP

Before (left) and after (right) photos of the 15th hole rebuild at Club Catalina undertaken in 2019

Describe some of the recent works you have undertaken at the club. How did you gain Board support and how did you maintain the momentum and engagement within your team through such a challenging period? Most recently, the club invested close to \$2 million with the installation of a brand new irrigation system which was completed on budget and on time in late 2022. It was a huge task bringing all stakeholders together to initially receive approval from the club Board and management. I worked closely with designer Dale Stafford for a number of years to come up with a design that would be efficient and complement our 27-hole facility.

After two years of trials, we went with a Rain Bird IC system. What we have in the ground now is state-of-the-art, with all 1440 sprinklers valve-in-head. All fairways have three rows and irrigate the fine turf surfaces only.

This system was installed over a 10-month window during the highest rainfall total on record. The course was never closed during the whole install and not one competition round was interrupted by contractors Waterland. The course team was responsible for all clean and backfilling, at times in atrocious conditions. To this day I look back with pride on what the team achieved. You don't get a result like we did without a great team and culture.

Complementing the irrigation work was the Prominent dosing system, which enables us to dose three products at any one time to improve what is, at times, horrendous water quality at the club. The system is flow and rate controlled to suit watering requirements and soil problems such as sodium, bicarbonates and pH etc. Other projects and improvements we have made include;

- The complete rebuild of the 15th hole in 2019 under the guidance of course architect Harley Kruse;
- Installation of an ESD washdown bay and all infrastructure in 2021;
- Tree removal programme (2018-2024);
- Two significant course machinery turnovers;
- Installation of a new maintenance compound and complete rebuild and refurbishment of maintenance team facilities (2024); and
- Developed a course masterplan.

Almost the day you submitted this profile you announced your resignation from Club Catalina, accepting the assistant superintendent role alongside Ryan Stores at Royal Canberra Golf Club. What a huge decision! Yes, it was a big decision and one I did not take lightly. I see it as a big progression and challenge in my turf management career. I have always had a soft spot for Royal Canberra Golf Club. It is a fantastic property and there is nothing quite like it in Australia. I am excited to be working at a club that is all about golf and the members. Club Catalina is a different beast with over 100 employees. Only 10 per cent of the staff work on the golf course, so focus and resources tend to be consumed inside the clubhouse as well as staff structure.

After so much hard work and achieving a lot with the team at Club Catalina, what prompted the move and how will you juggle family life and the new role? It was a phone call from Ryan Stores one afternoon and then a positive meeting with general manager Steve Sandilands. I'm really looking forward to assisting Ryan with day-to-day operations of the team and hopefully bringing strong leadership qualities to what is a relatively young and inexperienced crew.

The family have been nothing but supportive and are excited about the move. My daughter Brianna is in Year 10 and will finish Term 1 before she and my wife Rebecca move up to Canberra. I will be starting late February and will see the family most weekends whether it be in Bateman's Bay or in Canberra. Brianna is looking forward to coming back to the Bay to holiday with the rest of the family.

Who has influenced your turf management career and what impact did they have?

Without question my dad was a massive influence and supporter of anything I have achieved. I remember how proud he was when I was appointed course superintendent at Club Catalina. Mum is the rock of the family and has



Grounds' senior crew at Catalina comprised (from left) Jarrod Cottingham (irrigation tech), Craig Shephard (3IC), Wayne Gregory (assistant superintendent) and Matt Stevens (spray tech)

always had my back too. Rebecca – and, no, I am not writing this just because I know she will read it – has been a huge support over the years as well. As most turf managers know, this isn't a 9-5 lifestyle and her endless support and encouragement has allowed me to do what I love. I am a lucky man!

From a turf management perspective, Brent Hull, superintendent at Moruya Golf Club, has played a huge part in my journey. He gave me my first opportunity as an apprentice at Young Golf Club. Probably at the time I took it for granted how much practical knowledge Brent passed on to me in those early years. Fast forward 20 years when I took on the superintendent role at Club Catalina, he was there again whenever I needed his advice, being just 15 minutes down the road. All the turf managers on the NSW South Coast, in my opinion, produce some of the best surfaces in the country. They all know who they are and have played a massive part in my turf management journey and I cannot thank them enough.

Have you done any turf travel/work experience? How did that impact you and your career?

In 2019 I was fortunate to have my application accepted to work at the 119th US Open at Pebble Beach. I travelled across with three other Australian superintendents – Justin Bradbury (Camden GC), Idris Evans (Western Australian GC) and Adam Strachan (WA). We had a pre-Open tour to some great venues including Riviera Country Club, Cypress Point and the Rose Bowl to name a few. The whole week at the Open was an amazing experience and we were made to feel so welcome. The amount of trust they put in us volunteers was mind-blowing. I think this is testament to the respect Australian



Following the loss of his dad and brother-in-law in recent years, enjoying quality family time with wife Rebecca and daughter Brianna has become more important for Grounds

turf managers have all around the world. An experience like this only motivates you more to challenge yourself and others around you.

How do you balance turf, family and looking after yourself?

I think as superintendents a lot of us struggle to get the right balance between work and family life and my perspective on this has changed somewhat in recent years. In 2020, the year COVID hit, we lost dad. He was my best mate and it left me shattered. More recently, my sister lost her husband Craig to cancer at the age of 46. He was also a great mate and someone who I greatly admired.

Life can be cruel and short and what those two losses taught me is that we need to really cherish the precious time we have with family and friends. I have tried to balance that out by sharing the workload through the leadership team and it seems to be working. When someone on the team requests holidays you will very rarely receive a knockback. The team knows this and all will pull together and pick up any slack.

What do you like to do outside of work?

Do you have any hobbies? I love spending time with family, whether it be boating, fishing,



going to the beach or travelling around the beautiful NSW South Coast in the car. I do love playing golf, especially travelling to other courses. I also love my rugby league and I have passed that onto my daughter who is a tragic Canberra Raiders supporter. Going back a few years, I was president of the Young Rugby League Football Club between 2003 and 2006 and I managed the club's U18 team to a premiership in 2002.

One of my greatest moments as a family came last year when my nephew, who earlier that year had lost his dad, won his U15 rugby league grand final. They beat a team they had never beaten before, he scored two tries and was adjudged player of the match. It was a very emotional day for the family.

What advice would you give younger staff just starting out in turf management today?

Be patient and stick with it. Talk to as many turf professionals as you can and attend as many industry events as possible. Never stop learning and always back yourself.

Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

Semi-retired mowing fairways for Ryan at Royal Canberra – summers only though! 🌴



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